

Before the Divide
Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture

Edited by
FRANCESCA ORSINI



Orient BlackSwan

Contents

BEFORE THE DIVIDE

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Barahmasas in Hindi and Urdu

Francesca Orsini

The aim of this collection of essays is to move away from the received historical narratives of Hindi and Urdu, each with its own teleology, and look afresh at the textual material available in order to attempt a picture of north Indian literary culture that is at the same time more complex and layered and also more attuned to the nuances of register, accent, language choice, genre and audiences. As a start, we thought that it would be useful to concentrate on 'intermediary genres', i.e. those genres that fall in between the high literary tradition of Hindi, *riti* poetry in Braj Bhasha, and the high literary tradition of Urdu, centred mainly on the ghazal. As is the case with minor poets or works, the value and usefulness of these intermediary genres do not lie necessarily in themselves, but in how they force us to consider a broader range of texts and tastes than those envisaged by the canon and thereby reconsider the possible options and choices north Indian poets had before them. Why did a Sant write in Nagari Rekhta? Why did a Persian poet or an Avadhi Sufi mix Hindavi and Persian? Why did a sophisticated Rekhta poet like Uzlat write a barahmasa? Whatever their specific motivations, all these cases speak of an awareness of multiple literary models and a keenness to experiment with other literary or oral traditions that go against the purist intentions of modern literary historians.

In this essay I will consider one particular 'intermediary genre', the barahmasa or poem/song of the twelve months. In this kind of

poem an abandoned woman (*virahini* or *birahini*) pines for her absent lover or husband and describes her pitiful state, month after month, against the backdrop of seasonal changes and ritual events. Today, barahmasas are perceived only as a kind of folk song, but a significant literary tradition attests to the attractiveness of this template for poets in all the literary languages of north India for centuries. In fact barahmasas are found at the beginning of literary writing in several neo-Indo Aryan languages and the genre is characterised by remarkable ubiquity and flexibility.¹ As such, barahmasas represent the kind of 'open' or 'dialogic' genre that Thomas de Bruijn theorises in his essay in this volume. The female voice, her pining for and loyalty to, her absent lover and the calendrical cycle are the core elements of a matrix that poets from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds took up and modulated according to their specific taste and inclination. In the first part of this essay I will consider a range of these early vernacular poems before focusing on barahmasas in Urdu in the second part. Finally, I will consider briefly their transition into print in the 1860s, when the same barahmasas were printed in Devanagari and the Urdu script, and offer an example of popular literary taste that survived the Hindi-Urdu divide.

A FLEXIBLE GENRE

Within the multilingual and multiform literary field of medieval north India, Thomas de Bruijn argues in his contribution to this volume, genre 'was not primarily defined by a monologic and exclusive creative identity, but was rather a container that encompassed a paradigm of poetical aesthetics such as forms, metres and language, and a practice of reception and transmission'. Genre 'allowed for, and was often constructed as, a dialogic exchange with other genres, to which it referred in its use of images or which it completely incorporated'. This definition of genre as 'open', 'dialogic' and flexible applies particularly well to barahmasas, as their various manifestations will show.

¹For a full study of early barahmasas, see Vaudeville 1986.

For a start, the three chief characteristics of barahmasas—the woman's voice, the pain of separation from the beloved (*viraha*) and the catalogue of images pertaining to the seasons—are not exclusive to this genre, they are part of the Prakrit and Sanskrit poetic tradition from its early stages. The theme of the 'six seasons' (*ṣaḍṛtu*) was a great favourite and indeed a set-piece for the aspiring Sanskrit and Prakrit poet. Underlying both poetry and medicine—for poetry about the seasons is also found in Sanskrit medical texts—was a common perception of the qualities of each season and the activities, food, dress and behaviour appropriate to each of them. Thus medical texts grouped the six seasons in two sets of three. The first set—*śiśir*, *vasanta* and *grīṣma* (late winter, spring and summer)—was qualitatively hot and dry. *Varṣā*, *śarad* and *hemanta* (the rainy season, autumn and early winter), the second set, was characterised as cold and wet. The 'hot and dry' months were deemed debilitating for the human body, while the 'cold and wet' months were said to be invigorating.² The poetic 'description of the seasons' (*ṛituvarṇana*), rich in metaphoric connections and expressing time as a cycle, 'constantly on the fulcrum between memory and expectation', expressed a 'generic way of thinking about time' that went much beyond the realm of poets.³

However much they shared in terms of the stock of images and of the underlying moods and imagery connected to the seasons, barahmasas seem to have been in origin a purely popular genre, distinct from classical court poetry.⁴ That 'six seasons' and 'twelve months' were perceived as separate set-pieces expressing different moods is well brought out by the sixteenth-century Sufi poet Malik Muhammad Jayasi in his *Padmāvat* (see de Bruijn in this volume).⁵ According to the common pattern of these epics, the hero leaves his

²Selby 2000: 6.

³Ibid: 9.

⁴Vaudeville examines the possible origin of the form in chaumasa, or rain song of *viraha* (1986: 27–32); also see Zvabitel (1961) for Bengali baromasi.

⁵In this Jayasi followed other Avadhi Sufi poets before him who had already used barahmasas in their romances, starting from Maina's lament in Mulla Daud's *Candāyan* (1379) and Rupmini's in Qutban's *Mīrgāvatī*, see V.P. Dvivedi, *Barahmasa. The Song of the Seasons in Literature and Art*, 1980: 41–42.

first wife in his quest for the heroine. The preparations (*śṛṅgāra*) of the heroine, Padmavati, and the pleasures she enjoys over the course of one year with the hero, Ratansen, are described in terms of a 'six seasons' format and draw on the classical tradition in terms of tropes and diction. This *ṣaḍṛtu* is immediately followed by the sufferings of Ratansen's first wife, whom he abandoned at home in his pursuit of Padmavati. Her torments are instead expressed in the form of a *viraha* barahmasa. All the natural and climatic elements that made the lovers' dalliance all the more delightful in the first piece are reversed in sign: the same clouds, rains and bird's cries that heightened pleasure there now heighten the pain, and even the special insects that come out in the rainy season can be symbols of the restless *birahinī*. Here is Padmavati's rainy season in the *ṣaḍṛtu*:

*Ritu pāvas birasai piyu pāvā; sāvan bhādaū adhik sohāvā.
Kokila bain pāti baga chūti; dhani nisari jeū bir bahūti
Camakai bijju baris jaga sonā; dādara mora sabada suṭhi lonā.
Ramga rāti piya saṅga nisi jāgai; garajai camaki caumki kanṭha lāgai.
Sitāla bunda ūca caubārā; hariyara saba dekhiya sansārā
Malai samīra bāsa sukha bāsi; beli phūla seja sukha dāsī
Hariyara bhummi kusumbhī colā; au piya saṅga racā hindolā*

Doha:

*Pauna jharakke hiya harakha lagai siyari batāsa
Dhani jānai yah paunu hai paunu so apnī āsa. [337]*

In the rainy season, with one's lover near, *Sāvan* and *Bhādō* are so much more pleasant.

The cuckoo speaks, rows of herons fly, women flock out like scarlet rain-insects.

Lightning flashes, the earth glows in the rain, lovely sound the frog and the peacock.

Awake all night in love-play with her lover, she clutches him startled by thunder.

Cool raindrops, high-raised platform, the whole world looks verdant. Scented is the *malay* breeze, and happy, she spread a bed of tendril flowers.

Against the green earth, wearing a saffron bodice, she tied a swing with her beloved.

Doha:

The gusts of wind gladdened their hearts, cool felt the breeze,
She thought, this wind brings contentment.

But here is Nagmati's Savan in the barahmasa:

*Sāvan barisa meha atipānī; bharani bharai haū biraha jhurānī.
Lāgu punarbasu pīu na dekhā; bhai bāuri kahā kanta sarekhā.
Rakata ka āmsu pare bhūī tūṭī; rengi calī janū bīr bahūṭī
Sakhinha racā pīu samga hindolā; hariyara bhūī kusambhi tana colā.
Hiya hindola jasa dolai morā; biraha jhulāvai dei jhāmkorā.
Bāṭa asūjha athāha gāmbhīrā; Jiu bāura bā bhavai bāmbhīrā.
Jaga jala būḍī jahā lagi tākī; Mora nāva khevaka binu thākī.*

Doha:

*Parabata samunda agama bica bana behaṛa ghana dhankha.
Kimi kari bheṭaū kanta tohi nā mohi pāṇv na pankha. [345]*

Savan clouds are pouring down; fields are flooding but I burn with
viraha.

Punarvasu's constellation has appeared, my husband has not. I'm going
mad, where can he be?

My tears of blood fall on the earth and scatter like scarlet rain-insects.
My friends have hung swings with their lovers, green is the land and
saffron their clothes.

My heart swings, too, to and fro, tossed by *viraha* with violent blows.
Deep and unfathomable is the road; crazed I wander like a *bhambhira*
fly.

As far as you can see water covers the earth, [but] the boat of my life is
without my oarsman.

Doha:

Inaccessible mountains, oceans, forests and jungles stand between us,
How can I come and meet you, my spouse, without feet or wings!⁶

This incorporation of a barahmasa into an epic or a romance is
found both in Rajasthani rasaus like the *Bisaldev Rāsau* (oldest

⁶Text and tr. (slightly altered) in Vaudeville 1986: 65, 75.

manuscript, 1576) and in Avadhi Sufi romances right from the first
extant example, Mulla Daud's *Candāyan* (1379).⁷ In these works,
the barahmasa works as a stock element, barely woven into the
narrative of events. Both in the frame and in the body of the
barahmasa, the narrative element usually remains negligible.⁸

In her study of barahmasa folk songs, Susan Wadley has
emphasised the close correspondence between the natural description
of the months, the mental and physical state of the heroine and ritual
events marking the calendrical cycle. The physical and psychological
distress of the deserted heroine, she argues, is compounded by her
inability to perform the critical ritual activities of women and to
enjoy her lover's presence at the times of the year (the rainy season,
the cold month of Pus) when sexual activity is encouraged, if not
mandatory.⁹ However, although farmers' barahmasas do include the
critical events of the agricultural calendar, the same is not true for
most barahmasa songs. Nor are women's ritual events that central,
either. Thus, we could say instead, that this genre *implies* the climatic,
ritual and affective characteristics of each month and season but is
flexible enough to allow many possible emphases.

Though originally folk songs, barahmasas were taken up by
vernacular poets from the earliest stages of neo-Indo Aryan
literatures, possibly in their search for available models. As this
section will show, this appropriation of an oral form opened the
genre to a host of possible changes according to the level of
sophistication of the poet, the poem's function and its prospective
audience. The barahmasa was flexible at the formal level itself: it
could be incorporated into longer poems (e.g. Avadhi premakhyans
and Rajasthani rasaus), provide a poetic 'base' for palace wall-
paintings and approximate Perso-Urdu masnavis.¹⁰ In this sense,

⁷See Vaudeville 1986: 56–63.

⁸As Vaudeville remarks, '...the fact that a barahmasa is included in a narrative
work does not imply that the barahmasa itself is narrative in character.'
Vaudeville 1986: 9.

⁹Susan Wadley 1983: 62, 68.

¹⁰It is worth noting that we find illustrated manuscripts of Daud's poem.
The earliest known version—which could well be the first pictorial depiction
of a barahmasa extant—is a manuscript dated 1550; see Dvivedi 1980: 83.

the barahmasa can be understood as a 'matrix' of semantic paradigms and of positions in the literary field, in the sense used in this volume by Thomas de Bruijn.

This flexibility is evident even in what may appear as a stable element of the genre, i.e. the adoption of the female voice by male poets.¹¹ Although this element played a significant part in the appeal the barahmasa genre had for poets and in their poetic strategies, it should by no means be considered in uniform terms. Ann Gold and Gloria Raheja have alerted us to the importance of context and subtext in order to understand women's folk songs.¹² In considering the following corpus of barahmasas authored by male poets, I would similarly like to keep in mind the fact that the suffering woman's voice became a trope which could be used to flatter the courtly patron as the ideal lover, to express spiritual thirst and the strain of devotion, to provide visions of a pastoral world or simply to explore a whole new set of possible metaphors that the male subjectivity of the ghazal could not create (see also Oesterheld in this volume).

A rough typology of Hindi and Urdu barahmasas is enough to show the multiple positions they came to occupy in the literary field:

- a. religious poems (Jain barahmasas, Mirabai, Guru Nanak, Guru Arjan);
- b. part of longer narratives (*Padmavāt*, *Bisaldev rāsau*);
- c. Braj Bhasha riti poems (Keshavdas, Lakhansen), sometimes to accompany miniature albums and palace wall paintings;
- d. Urdu Rekhta poets both before and after 1700 (Uzlat, Afzal). These are often longer poems (300–400 vv.) with greater focus on the heroine's mental and physical distress. Metre and imagery are partly drawn from Perso-Urdu poetry, but the language remains very mixed.

And, printed in the nineteenth century:

¹¹Mirabai is a notable exception; see below.

¹²Gloria Raheja and Ann Grodzin Gold (1994) argue that among themselves women do not feel that they have to adopt the postures of submission and modesty they have to in the presence of men, and their song genres contain much sexual banter and innuendo.

- e. poems by popular urban Urdu poets (Maqṣud, the anonymous author of *Sundarkalī* and Ranj).
- f. songs printed singly and in collections in both Nagari and Urdu script (Khairashah, Harnam, etc.)
- g. short religious songs (Benimadho, etc.)

So far, this essay has examined barahmasas in Avadhi romances. The following sections take up examples from the other groups.

RELIGIOUS BARAHMASAS

One typical change in function took place at the hand of religious poets, who either interpreted the heroine's *viraha* in spiritual and/or devotional terms—as the pain of the soul's separation from God—or else grafted the template onto a story of spiritual conversion or tagged a didactic message onto every month.¹³ The earliest known literary example, a short poem in late Apabhramsha by the Jain monk Dharam Suri, combined prose and verse on the months of the year with verses of self-praise and fragments of songs on *viraha*.¹⁴ Charlotte Vaudeville has documented the significant production in old Gujarati of Jain barahmasas on the subject of Neminath's desertion of his wife Rajmati on their wedding day to follow a life of renunciation.¹⁵ Barahmasas were taken up for a religious purpose also by Nath Yogis, Sufis, Sants and Bhaktas. Krishna, the absent

¹³The barahmasa attributed to Guru Arjan in the *Guru Granth* is purely didactic, whereas the one attributed to Guru Nanak is of a devotional nature. Even Nagmati's lament quoted above has tinges of a spiritual experience (e.g. the 'unfathomable path').

¹⁴Found in a late twelfth-century manuscript at Patan; see Vaudeville 1986: 18.

¹⁵According to Vaudeville, the *viraha* barahmasa of Rajimati pining for Nemi for twelve months before herself embracing the ascetic life 'shows that Jain munis were quick to use *viraha-gītas* of the chaumasa or barahmasa type to disseminate their ascetic teaching, and the change from *virahā* to *vairāgya*, i.e. from a lament for solitude to an attitude of contempt for the world and its fleeting joys, occurs as a natural development'. Vaudeville 1986: 27.

god-lover par excellence, fitted into the role very well, as the following barahmasa attributed to Mirabai shows,

Piyā mohiṃ darsaṅ dījai ho.

Ber ber mainṃ ṭerahūṃ ahe kripā kūjai ho. [Refrain]

Jeth mahīne jal viṇā panchī dukh hoi ho.

Mor āsarḥam kuralahe ghan chātrāg soī ho.

My love, give me the vision of Yourself:

Again and again I call You, have pity on me, ho! [Refrain]

In the month of *Jeth*, for want of water the bird is in pain, ho.

In *Asarh* the peacock throws its cry, the *chātaka* bird calls the cloud, ho.¹⁶

BRAJ BHASHA BARAHMASAS

Roughly contemporary to Mirabai, Keshavdas (fl. 1600) perfected a sophisticated poetic idiom in Braj Bhasha that found immediate and wide success in courtly circles all over north India (see Allison Busch in this volume). His barahmasa seems to have achieved regional fame and was the one most often reproduced in palace paintings. According to the conventions of *riti* poetry, the verses in his poem are highly alliterative and dense with poetic figures. The metres are *savaiya* and *doha* and the protagonist are the ideal *nāyāk* and *nāyikā*, identified as Krishna and Radha. The mood is, intriguingly, *not* one of *viraha*. Rather, the *nāyikā* describes the natural

¹⁶ See Vaudeville 1986: 53, 56. In several of the printed, manuscript and oral barahmasas of the nineteenth century attributed to Surdas or Tulsidas, the template was used to recollect the adventures of Krishna or Rama or the marriage between Krishna and Rukmini. The names Krishna, Murari, Shyam and also Raghubir also crop up regularly in secular barahmasas, evidence of the blurred boundary between secular and religious love that poetry in the public domain also display, and of the many and layered resonances that had gathered around the Krishna-gopi motif. See e.g. *Bārahmāsā Benīmādho* (below), *Rāmcandrajī kī bārahmāsī* by Ganeshdas (Fatehgarh 1868); on the marriage between Krishna and Rukmini, *Bārahmāsā Shambhū Rāy* (Delhi 1875).

and ritual characteristics of each month and urges the *nāyāk* not to go away—in a way, the classical treatment of the ‘six seasons’ adapted to a twelve-months format. The aim is to convey the mood of each month in its various aspects, the ‘generic way of thinking about time’ in Selby’s words, rather than to express mental and physical suffering. The paintings often show the couple in the foreground, while descriptive elements from the verses offer clues to painters and establish a basic vocabulary for the depiction of every month. One painting of the month of Bhadon of the Bikaner school, for example, shows an elephant, a lion and a tiger, all mentioned in the verses:

Ghorata ghana cahū ora; ghosa nirghosini maṇḍahi,

Dhārādhara dhara dharani musala dhārana jala chaṇḍahi.

Jhiliṅ gana jhankāra, pavana jhuki jhuki jhakajhorata,

Bāgha-simha guṅjarata, puñja kuñjara taru torata.

Nisi dina viśeṣa nihi seṣa miti, jāta suolī orīai.

Desahī piyūṣa paradesa viṣa, bhādaū bhauna na chorīai.

Dark clouds have gathered all around; they thunder and thunder.

Rain pours down in heavy torrents.

Cicadas chirp, strong winds blow fiercely.

Tiger and lion roar, elephants dishevel trees.

Night and day, there is no difference,

Home is nectar, travelling abroad is poison, one should not leave home
in the month of *Bhādō*.¹⁷

¹⁷ Another painting of the Bikaner school depicting the summer months shows the hero and heroine seated before a pavillion with a maid in attendance, while two wayfarers rest under the shade of trees in the foreground, and a tiger and cobra are seen together in the lower right corner; see V.P. Dvivedi 1980: 105. Keshavdas’s verses run as follow: [The sun is so bright and scorching that] The five elements—air, water, sky, earth and fire have become one—like fire.

Deserted are the roads, the tanks parched dry [seeing which the elephants do not go out].

Cobras and lions sleep inside.

My love, even strong creatures become weak, the whole world is ill at ease. Keshavdas says, the elders say one should not go out in this month.

This is clearly a sophisticated composition, a courtly piece that, combined with the pictorial representation, formed an appealing 'set' on *śṛṅgāra* for the princely patron, who could recognise himself in the *nāyaka* and his sexual attractiveness, and could appreciate the richly decorated settings.¹⁸ Sets based on Keshavdas's poem were painted at Malwa, Jaipur, Bikaner, Kangra, Datarpur, and Alwar up to the nineteenth century.¹⁹

In the hands of other Braj Bhasha poets, the result could be a kind of simplified *śṛṅgāra* with seasonal details.²⁰ Here is an example, in a manuscript dated 1776, by a poet called Lakhansen:

Caṛhe asāṛh sukhahi ke māsā; jehi vidhi dehi so karai vilāsā.
Dukh sukh ghar apne auwa; ge pardes abhāgā chāyo.
Chāīni mandir aur caupāri; raci raci chāyeni bārahduārī.
Pākyau ām subhaga amrāt; amrita phala yek cār suthāī.
Pākyau kaṭahar baḍaha kerā; pākyau pāna tamolīna kerā....
Sendūr cīr mai dharāvō hariyā; sudīna devasa piyā dīkh ughārī.
Dekhata nāh leva ura lāī; ham ranga [sic anga] mori rahava alsāī.

¹⁸In most cases, sets of twelve months were painted along with Devanagari captions, either on a panel at the top or on the back of the painting, thus establishing beyond doubt that the paintings were based on the literary descriptions; V.P. Dvivedi 1980: 81.

¹⁹Other poets whose barahmasas were illustrated were Govind, Datta, Anandram, Kashiram and Ramkishan. Govind's barahmasa is one of viraha and the text is more similar to that of the folk songs, though the language is literary Braj Bhasha. The *nāyikā* is depicted without her lover; in the painting she is (still fully dressed) surrounded by a maid and two female musicians in a garden pavillion with many flowers, while the moon shines in the sky. See V.P. Dvivedi 1980: 141-52.

²⁰Chaturvedi's rough list of Devanagari manuscripts in the hands of individuals in UP and copied in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries includes thirty barahmasas. Five of them are ones that were also printed in Devanagari and Urdu, from where they may have made their way into personal manuscript collections. Gopal Narayan Bahura's list of manuscripts held in Amber and Jaipur lists another two pages of Barahmasas by local court poets. Jawaharlal Chaturvedi 1965: 163-70; Bahura 1976: 175-76.

Doha:

Āthau anga rasa bhīni khāv adhara mukh pāna.
*Taba sukh hoi parāpati jab ghar āvahi kānha.*²¹

Asarh has come, the month of happiness; those to whom God has granted it, enjoy themselves.

Joys and troubles at home; he went away and left me wretched.

[Others] thatch houses and roofs and make twelve-pillared pavilions. Mangoes ripen in the lovely groves, four or five lovely *amritphal*, *Jackfruit*, *badaha* and banana ripen. The betel-leaf tree of the betel-seller too.

Quick, put on *sendur* and clothes, to show yourself on the happy day your beloved appears.

Seeing her lord she took him to her heart: 'All my body feels languid.'

Doha:

Her whole body is drenched in *rasa*, her lips are red with *betel*,
 Only then she will find happiness when her spouse comes home.

In Hindi critical vocabulary, this poem of 120 verses would be called *riti-mukta*, i.e. devoid of literary tropes. The language is Bagheli, i.e. a mixture of Avadhi and Bundelkhandi (as seen from forms like 'ge' for 'gaye'). The mood is also mixed, sensual rather than pathetic, with a bountiful nature (jackfruit, mangoes, areca nut and bananas are ripe, and a sensual heroine whose betel-red lips invite desire). As with Keshavdas, this shift in emphasis can be understood in terms of an audience of poetry practitioners and connoisseurs who would see the barahmasa as another form of erotic poetry.

Although the Braj Bhasha poetry of Keshavdas and other *riti* poets did get printed in the early poetic anthologies (see Bangha 2001) and also in individual volumes, often sumptuously produced for princely patrons, barahmasas do not seem to have figured in such publications, nor were they reprinted in the collections we will survey later.

²¹A copy of the manuscript text was generously given to me by Dr Kishorilal.

URDU BARAHMASAS

A rather different treatment of the genre is the one we see at the hands of Muhammad Afzal 'Afzal', whose *Bikaṭ Kahānī* has attracted critical attention as the first significant poem in Urdu/Rekhta composed in north India (see Bangha and Oesterheld in this volume). *Bikaṭ Kahānī* was only the first in a considerable production of Urdu barahmasas documented by Dr Tanvir Ahmad Alvi (1988), which started in the seventeenth century and continued throughout the nineteenth century and well into the world of print. Alvi's edited collection of twelve Urdu barahmasas shows that although the genre did not become part of the high Urdu literary tradition that developed in north India in the eighteenth century around the ghazal, it was nevertheless widely practiced, all the way from Rajasthan to Bihar. Three kinds of poets seem to have written Urdu barahmasas in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: Sufis like Hazrat Jauhri of Bihar, Maulvi Hafizullah Qadiri of Badaun and, in the nineteenth century, Shaikh Ibadullah Badal 'Ranj' and Shaikh Abdullah Ansari Kanpuri; educated provincial officers/servicemen, like Ilahi Bakhsh; and 'bazaar poets' like Maqṣud of Lucknow. They were all part of the wider world of Urdu poetry but probably outside the aristocratic poetic circles of *ustads*, *shagirds* and *musha'iras*.²² Generally speaking, in the hands of these poets barahmasa developed either on the lines of a romantic masnavi, sometimes with spiritual but usually with secular overtones, or else closer to the perceived realm of the pastoral which drew upon secular and/or Krishna love matter, as can be seen especially for the theme of Holi. Only a few more sophisticated poets like Uzlat and Vahshat (see below) brought to bear the treasure trove of Perso-Urdu poetic themes and style and crafted metaphors that developed the subject of love-suffering. Instead, most Urdu barahmasa writers, even when drawing upon Perso-Urdu poetic vocabulary, used only first-level metaphors and simple tropes. Some followed Afzal's example and continued to use 'mixed' (Rekhta) language, alternating Persian and

²²For brief biographical information, when available, see Tanvir Ahmad Alvi 1988.

Hindi lines. Most went for a colloquial register full of Hindi *tadbhava* words. While Christina Oesterheld's essay on marsiyas in this collection suggests that such a register was used by marsiya poets to evoke the domestic world of women and their grief, in the case of barahmasas we will see that the colloquial register rich in idiomatic expressions and *tadbhava* words evokes a mundane world of natural details, seasonal tasks and festivities.²³ Nature itself is a mixture of poetic stereotypes (the peacock and the cuckoo, the black monsoon clouds) and of more minute details, like the *bīr bahoṭī* (*Buccella carniola* or 'rain insect'), the particular red insect that comes out during the rains, or the names given to the rain in each specific fortnight of the monsoon (Maqṣud). At a time when Urdu poetry in north India was developing along sophisticated Persian models in the wake of Vali's sensational ghazals, barahmasas offered an appealing folksy idiom and a not-too-implicit sensuality, linked to the feminine voice and the cycle of seasons. Though clearly not ignorant of the Perso-Urdu poetic tradition, Urdu barahmasa poets strove to use a different idiom, and mixed their Khari Boli with Braj Bhasha and local words, proverbs and Persian words as 'mispronounced' by uneducated people to achieve a 'popular' (for want to better term) effect.

Afzal's *Bikaṭ Kahānī* is a lyrical (not a narrative) poem in which Afzal returns again and again to the sufferings of the *birahini*. It is a typical *viraha* barahmasa right from the first verse:

Suno sakhyo bikat merī kahānī; bhāī haū 'ishq ke ḡham sō divānī
Na mujh kō bhūk dīn nā nīnd rātā; birah ke dard sō sīnā pīrātā.

²³E.g. Hafizullah Qadiri's *Bārahmāsa neh* for example explicitly quotes a proverb about the first cold spell of Agahan that rekindles desire for hot food: '*Agahan kā terī honā kyā kaṭhīn hai/ kahāvat hai agahan handīyā adhan hai*'. (Times passes with difficulty in Agahan; as the saying goes 'the frying pan is sizzling'); Alvi 1988: 246, v. 119. Maulvi Hafizullah Qadiri was the son of a Qadiriyya Shaikh from Badaun, and after a traditional education in Rampur he was himself initiated in the *silsilā* and became the Khalifa. He settled in a village in Bilaspur district and lived there all his life, writing spiritual works in Persian and dispensing guidance and advice. According to the editor of his barahmasa, he was also a poet in Persian, Urdu and Avadhi, but his barahmasa circulated orally until recent times; see Alvi 1988: 80.

Tamāmī lok mujhi baurī kahī rī; k̄hirad gum karda majnū ho rahī rī (Afzal 1991: vv 1–3)

Listen, friends, to my sad story. I have become mad with the pain of love.

I have no hunger in the day, no sleep at night. Separation hurts my chest.

The whole world calls me crazy. I've lost my reason, I've become mad.

Afzal really set the ground for the development of the genre in Urdu, and his example was acknowledged either explicitly (Ilahi Bakhsh) or implicitly (Vahshat, Najib, Ranj) by later poets. For one thing, he used a metre common to Persian and Urdu masnavis (*ḥazaj-i musaddas-i mahzūf*) which all Urdu barahmasa writers adopted after him. Secondly, his poem is considerably longer than folk barahmasas (vv 321), and most Urdu barahmasas after his varied between two and four hundred verses. According to Tanvir Ahmad Alvi it was transmitted mostly orally, and the oldest manuscript available dates from almost two hundred years after its composition. While the relatively large number of manuscripts from all over north India and the Deccan testify to its enduring popularity, it is hardly mentioned in tazkiras of Urdu poets.²⁴

The poetic conventions that Afzal introduced would have alerted his readers and listeners that this was a poem like a masnavi: thus the first 57 verses consist of a general statement on love.²⁵ Love (*'ishq*) is an illness which no medicine, doctor or exorcist can cure (v. 4). It is a fire in which the whole world burns, and only those who experience it know the pain it brings. Love is everywhere, in the mosque, the Ka'ba and the temple, and everything we see is the work of love. Next, the *birahini* speaks of the madness and self-forgetfulness that love has induced in her: like Majnun, it has set her apart from her family and led her to a metaphorical desert, so that now she has lost all sense and, wandering like a beggar, she is

²⁴See Alvi 1988: 22.

²⁵Later Urdu barahmasa writers also often began with an introduction on love, and some—e.g. Mufti Ilahi Bakhsh, Maqṣud, Rabbani—prefaced it with formal praise (*ḥamd*) of God and the Prophet.

made the object of derision. Madness has planted its flag in the kingdom of life and has played havoc in the house of reason. It has stolen her patience and burnt her sense of comfort; it has made her drink the cup of madness and forget herself. Finally, love is described as magic, which can turn a wise man into a madman and vice versa. An initial moment of happiness with her beloved aroused the envy of heaven, which then separated them again.²⁶ This temporary union (*vaṣl*) followed by a long and painful separation is not an uncommon theme in Perso-Urdu poetry, but only Afzal, and a century and a half later, Vahshat used it in their barahmasas.²⁷ The barahmasa proper consists of months of varied length (between vv 9 and 30), beginning with Savan. Phagun, with the Holi festival, gets the most attention (vv 40).²⁸ At the end, when the husband/lover has come back in Asarh after the *birahini* had a premonitory dream (vv 293–300), a few lines warn against making love, for it is not easy and deprives you of all comfort (vv 308–20).²⁹

The hypothesis that Afzal might have taken the cue for his barahmasa from folk songs is corroborated by the formulaic filler-verses ('*Sajan pardes, māñ nit dukh bharū rī*'; '[Agahan] dukh de gayā ab [Pūs] āyā'; '*Piyā ke dard se bis khā marū rī*', etc.)³⁰ that are practically

²⁶Text in Hashmi and Khan (eds) 1979: vv 4–54.

²⁷Alvi has suggested that the fleeting meeting, which only serves to heighten the intensity of the lover's suffering, may indicate the influence of the Sufi theory of the stages (*maḥala*) that the disciple must undergo in his spiritual training (personal communication).

²⁸*Ibid*: 40 vv. Apart from Afzal's poem, which starts with Savan, the second month of the rainy season, and Vahshat's, which starts in spring with the month of Chait, all follow the folk-song template by starting with the first month of the rainy season, Asarh.

²⁹Perhaps also under the influence of other narrative poems (*masnavis*), some poets like Maqṣud (1790s?), the author of *Sundarkalī*, Najib (1830s) and Ranj (1872) framed the barahmasa through a narrator, who either hears the story from the woman in question or who intervenes in the narration, especially towards the end when the meeting between her and her returning lover-husband takes place.

³⁰'My love is abroad and I'm suffering constantly', '[The month of Agahan] has left after giving me much grief, now [Pūs] has come', 'The pain for my beloved makes me feel like taking poison.'

absent from the later, more polished Urdu barahmasas. But to the template of the calendrical cycle, with its web of climatic, ritual and emotional connections, and with its motifs of the pandit and the mullah, the bird-messenger, the dream and leaving home as a *jogin*—to all this, Afzal added the symbolism and language of love of Perso-Urdu poetry. For example, if Afzal's depiction of the onset of the rains in the month of Savan and its effect on the *birahini* is a typical example of the theme:

Carhā sāvan bajā mār³¹ au naqqāra; sajan bin kaun hai sāthī hamārā
Ghatā kāri cahārō or chāī; birah kī fauj ne kinī carhāī.

Savan has come with drums and kettledrums; without my love I have no company.

Black clouds overcast; the army of *birah* has attacked me.

(Afzal 1991: 28, 49–50)

In the next section, the raincloud (*ghatā*) is equated with the raincloud of sorrow that is about to burst (into tears) in her breast, and the drumming noise of the clouds (like *naqqāra*) is 'sounding the drum of death for me'.

Perhaps because of direct borrowing from women's folk songs or because it was an intriguing voice to adopt, there are several verses in which the *birahini* reproaches her absent husband in the strongest terms—a kind of pleasure in colourful and down-to-earth 'woman's language' that we find again in other Urdu barahmasas and in the mid-nineteenth century masnavis by Mirza Shauq Lakhnavi.³¹ Here, for example, the *birahini* asks the crow-messenger to go and tell the *pardesī piyā*:

'Ahad kar gae ajhū na āe; are kin saut ne tone calāe.
Daghābāzī musāfir sō na kīje; itā dukhṛā ghatībō ko na dije. [...]
Gayī so jāne de, ab āo ghar re; are zālim khudā kā khauf kar re.

You went with a promise, but never came back; what stepwife has ensnared you?

³¹Ibid: 29, 30, vv. 76, 82.

Do not cheat the poor traveller, do not afflict the helpless. [...]
Let bygones be bygones, come home now. Oh cruel one! Fear God at least!³²

The suspicion that this kind of reproach is a pose that the male poet (and audience) much enjoyed is supported by some other verses in which this kind of anger is immediately followed by protestations of love, indeed of subjection:

Are zālim tere paiyā parū ri; dil o jān tujh upar qurbā karū rī.
Terī bādī kī bādī ho rahūgī; jo kuch mujh ko kahegā so karūgī.
Kahegā so karūgī āo re hāy; mukh apnā tuk mujhe dekhāo re hāy.

You cruel one, I fall at your feet. I'll give my life for you.

I'll serve you as your servant's slave. I'll do everything you say.

I'll do what you say. Oh please do come, just show me your face.³³

As Imre Bangha has already amply shown in his essay in this volume, the language of Afzal's poem is a Rekhta that alternates between Khari Boli and Persian (see also Allison Busch in this volume). This remained customary for several Urdu barahmasas up to the nineteenth century, even after Mir's kind of Rekhta had become dominant—as if to show the lasting impact that Afzal's poem had on Urdu readers and poets *despite* its non-canonical status.³⁴ A hundred and fifty years later, Mufti Ilahi Bakhsh, a *jamādār* (police officer) in the service of the Raja of Kishangarh wrote quite a sophisticated barahmasa under the same title and clearly modelled on Afzal's, whose popularity he explicitly acknowledged:³⁵

Sunī hogī bikaṭ tumne kahānī; sab uske khāme kī ātish fishānī.
Valekin māī jo dekhā usko sārā; tabī'at ne merī ik josh mārā.
Ye āyā dil mē, kahie ek kahānī; bayā ho jis mē soz-e dil nihānī.

³²Hashmi and Khan (eds) 1973: 37, vv 181–82, 186.

³³Ibid: 40, vv 227–29.

³⁴I have not come across any edition of Afzal's poem printed in the nineteenth century, but Alvi (1988) states that a large number of manuscript copies are extant in north India and the Deccan.

³⁵He was born and educated in the 1780s according to Alvi 1988: 94; the verse is quoted on p. 100.

You must have heard the *Bikaṭ kahānī*; everyone praises its pen to the sky.

But after I had seen it all, I was taken by a sudden zeal

I thought, why don't I tell a story which describes the inner pain of the heart?

Those who wrote barahmasas were not, it is worth restating, the famous and cosmopolitan Urdu poets. The only exception is Mir Abdul-Vali Uzlat (1750ca.) from Surat, a friend of Mir's, whom he helped by providing details about poets in the Deccan for his tazkira. A great traveller, he is known to have been interested in painting and to have composed poetry in other 'Hindi'-genres, including a *ragamala*, and several kinds of riddles (*do arthi*, *shish arthi*), as well as *kabitt*, *chand*, *dohra*, *soratha*, *jhulna* and other popular genres.³⁶ His choice of a barahmasa thus seems in line with his other interests.³⁷ His is a much shorter and compact poem (79 vv.), also in the *ḥazaj* metre and with an introduction on love (14 vv.) followed by regular sections of five verses each, starting with Asarh. The language is Khari Boli. The interest of this poem for us lies in the way it shows an accomplished poet in Persian and Urdu bringing metaphors and wordplay into the template in order to craft verses dense with literary echoes. Thus, the onset of the rains, already described by Afzal as the attack of an 'army of clouds', is expressed by Uzlat in the following terms:

³⁶Alvi 1988; A.J. Zaidi 1993.

³⁷Interestingly, the only other Urdu-courtly poet to compose a barahmasa, Mir Bahadur Ali 'Vahshat' from Lucknow, quickly lost his way and ended up writing a Saqinama instead. A soldier/courtier and a contemporary of Mir Hasan, he is mentioned in several tazkiras as the author of Urdu verse in the manner of his day (i.e. *ihām*) though he did not write much, but only the tazkiras nearest to him in time ever mention his barahmasa, which is never quoted. A long and rambling poem (515 vv.), it is the furthest from the barahmasa template: it starts unusually in Chait, soon forgets about describing seasonal and ritual events and instead inserts verses to the cupbearer to link each month to the next, and what more the lover-protagonist is a man. In language, too, it is pure Perso-Urdu Khari Boli, and introduces metaphors that are unusual in barahmasa poetry. See Alvi 1988: 186-213.

Asārḥ āyā hai bādāl kī faujē; kī teghē barf kī marī ha: maujē.
Girī hāī ashk sang uṭh uṭh malve; hamāre lakḥt-e dil ke pal pal ole.

Asarh came, and armies of clouds; gale after gale blowing swords of ice.

Tears of stone fell, ruins galore; hail crushed my heart to pieces.³⁸

'Armies of clouds' strike with 'swords of ice'; teardrops, implicitly equated with raindrops, are so hard and heavy that they reduce everything to ruin, while hailstorms break her heart into pieces. The other women's pleasure in swinging on swings in the rainy season is juxtaposed as follows to the predicament of the *birahini*, whose life swings dangerously on the thin thread of her breath:

Jinhō ke pī hāī ghar so caṛḥ hindōle; khushī se pēgtī hai kalole.
Jhulātī hū māī; jhulā sās kā hāy; jo pī āvē to dil kā ṭīfl sukh pāy.

The women whose husbands are at home climb on swings, surging and swinging.

I swing on the thread of my breath, let my beloved come, the 'child of my heart' will rejoice.³⁹

The *birahini* 'burns' in the fire (*tap*, *tapnā*) of separation even as everybody else is shivering in the cold, and she feels all the hotter in the hot season. In the hot month of Baisakh, wrote Jayasi, even a sandal-scented bodice 'scorches' Nagmati.⁴⁰ Often this burning has explicit sexual connotation, but in this literary Urdu barahmasas heat and fire are productive of other metaphors as well. This is how Uzlat writes about Baisakh:

Jab āyā āg sā ye mās baisākh; umīdē dil mē sab jal kar hūī rākh.
Gudāz-e yās se jyū dil pighal jāe; dil ānsū ho palak par āke ḍhal jāe.

When Baisakh came like a fire; it burnt all hope in my heart to ashes. As it melts out of despair, my heart dissolves into a tear on the eyelashes.⁴¹

³⁸Alvi 1988: 162, vv 15.17

³⁹Ibid: 165, vv 18-19.

⁴⁰Agarwal 1988: 353.

Before we turn to more folksy barahmasas, we should mention the *Bikaṭ Kahānī* by Ilahi Bakhsh, composed probably a few decades later in the early nineteenth century. This poem is not only evidence of the enduring popularity of Afzal's model among amateur Urdu poets, but it also gives a good sense of what became of a barahmasa in the hands of a provincial officer with a Persian education and a literary sense. His poem, like Vahshat's, is rather longer than Afzal's (410 vv.) though in the same metre.⁴² Linguistically, it is in Khari Boli with some Braj Bhasha orthography and alternative grammatical forms (e.g. *karat hai* as well as *kare hai*). Also in terms of vocabulary, the range is strikingly broad. Persian and even Arabic words are used freely, according to both the original and the Indian pronunciation. In the verse 'Yakāyak ān kar jab ra'd garjā/dhamak se ūs kī merā jī larjā' (v 125), for example, the Arabic word *ra'd* is used for 'cloud' instead of the usual *megh* and *bādal*, but the Persian verb *larzīdan* is spelt as it is pronounced in Hindi, i.e. *larajnā*.⁴³ Is this a conscious imitation of local pronunciation? Verses that are typical of folk barahmasas like:

Gai yek 'umr, pi ab tak na ae; kaho kyō ab tak pardes chāe.

A whole life has passed, yet my love is not come yet; tell me why has he gone abroad (v. 271)

are offset by Urduising others, like this description of spring:

'Ajab dilkhvāh mausam suhāvnā hai Sakhī gulshan mū har ek gul khilā hai.

⁴¹Alvi 1988: 165, vv. 65, 69.

⁴²Like other barahmasas by Muslim poets, it begins with the praise of God (27 vv.) followed by an introduction on love (17 vv.), in which the poet states in clear terms that this is a poem about worldly love. The months vary in length (between 20 and 40 verses); the longest month is the first one, Asarh, which does not begin with the rains but with the heroine looking for her beloved in every house; see Alvi 1988: 255-77.

⁴³Persian participles (like *nālān*, *sūzān*) and Arabic words like *ibtidā* also do not normally feature in barahmasas.

Wondrously pleasing is the weather. My friend, in the garden every flower is in bloom. (v 327)

The mixed lexicon and imagery is best shown by this example from the month of Baisakh, where typical Indian birds (like the *kokilā* and the *parevā*) are mixed with those of Perso-Urdu poetry (the *bulbul*, the *qamrī*, the *fākhtā*):

*Karē cuhalē caman mē jāke bulbul, macāvē shor aur dālē bahut ghul.
Phire qamrī khushī āvāz kartī, sanobar sāt milkar nāz kartī.
Pukāre fākhtā kūkū udhar se, lagāve āg mujh dukhiyā ke bar se.
Are jab kokilā ne kūk māri, lagī dil mē mere birahā kaṭāri.
Yakāek jab kahī bole parevā, aji mujh birahini kā jān levā.
Maṣ sun āvāz ko ḥairā ho hū, piyā kī yād kar gham se jarū hū.*

Nightingales make merry in the garden chirping loudly and noisily.
The happy partridge struts and coos, flirting happily with the fir tree.
While the ring-dove cooing aloud sets my poor breast on fire.
Oh anywhere I hear the cuckoo's cry; it's a dagger piercing my poor heart.
When the turtle dove raises its sudden cry, it takes away this poor woman's heart.
These calls and cries have made me distracted; the memory of my beloved is burning me. (Alvi 1998: 273, vv 350-355)

This hybrid language well corresponds to a hybrid poetic idiom and imagination. For example, although the *birahini* conforms by and large to the type of the 'gopi pining for Krishna'—for example, she goes and searches the forest and rails at his treacherous dalliances with other women—there are other touches, too, that bring her closer to the flirtatious and argumentative heroines of Shauq's masnavis, for example her threat to die and bring *rusvā-e 'ālam* on the cruel beloved. Typically, Persianising verses describe the lover's pitiful state, while the vocabulary turns to Khari Boli-Braj Bhasha when rituals and festivals are mentioned. Here, for example, the merriment of other women during Holi is described in greater detail and with greater enthusiasm than usual:

Sajan par apne nakatoṛā karē rī, k̄hushī se rang mē pi ko bharē rī.
 Liye hātho mē pickārī phirat hāī. 'Abir apne piyā ke mukh malat hāī,
 Gulāl aur rang sab kuch khelte hāī, gulāb aur mashq us me malte hāī.
 Are 'ālam mē horī saj rahī hai, daf aur mirdāng kī gat baj rahī hai.
 Harek mahalō mē bas bājē hāī jhānjan. Suhāgin nār ke pāō ke bichvan.
 Rangīlī cūrī par rang dārē, bhaī horī mē baurī sārī nārē.

They sneer at their husbands, those happy ones, and merrily splash them with colour.

They strut holding their *pichkaris*, rubbing their faces with colour.

They play with colours and coloured water, smeared with rose and musk.

Holi is warming up all around, you can hear the tambourine and the drum.

Anklets and toe-rings jingle from every house, those happy married women.

Throwing colour on their colourful *chunris*, all the women flow crazed in the stream of Holi (270–71, vv 315–22).

What we see at work is a move within the genre away from Afzal's exclusive focus on love as suffering to the combined appeal of a pining and/or argumentative heroine and the worldly pleasures that the other women, the *suhagins*, actually enjoy. It is precisely this kind of combination that we shall find in the more popular *barahmasas* printed time and time again in the nineteenth century.

The *barahmasa* by Maq̄sud, a Lucknow watercarrier (*bhishtī*) and a contemporary of Mushafi who acquired some fame and following as a 'bazaar' poet and is mentioned begrudgingly in Mushafi's *Tazkīra-yi hindī* (completed 1794–95), is a strikingly confident poem in standard Khari Boli, of medium length (208 vv) and in the usual *hazaj* metre. In size and in language, Maq̄sud's *barahmasa* stands somewhat in the middle between the folk songs and the more literary Urdu narrative poems.⁴⁴ Uniquely, the occupation that keeps

⁴⁴Maq̄sud's is one of the few *barahmasas* to claim to be a 'story' told by a narrator about the *birahini*: after the praise of God (vv 1–27), it introduces the *birahini* ('Sunī hai hamne birahan kī zabāni/kahā kartī thī ro ro yah kahāni/29) and the customary reflection on the power of love (28–45), which introduces the combination of love lament and seasonal calendar.

the *birahini*'s husband away is actually mentioned, and several verses are devoted to fantasies about that *pardes*: he is a soldier at the service of a *hakim*, an officer, and the heroine wishes him to be transferred (*taghrīr*) so that her husband will come home (vv 126–28). Stylistically, the *birahini*'s voice is very similar to what was projected as 'woman's speech' in nineteenth-century *masnavis*—a language full of expletives, proverbs and insults. In fact, Maq̄sud appears equally at ease with both sets of vocabulary, that of Perso-Urdu poetry and that of local, everyday speech, and is able to mix them in an easy flow:

Birah kī fauj ne ā mujhko gherā. Nahī mujhmē ab hosh merā.
 Nikal ākhō se lakht-e dil kī boṭī. Zamī par ho gai bīrā bahoṭī.
 Piyā jis roz ghar se thā sidhārā. Qamr-e 'aqrab me āyā sitārā.
 Sitārā nahus thā aur bad gharī thī. Shab-e furqat merē sir par kharī thī.

The army of *birah* came and surrounded me, leaving me out of my wits. My heart broke in pieces out of my eyes; it fell on the ground like scarlet rain-insects.

The day my love left home; the star came into the moon of Scorpio.

It was an ominous star, an ill-fated moment; the 'Night of Separation' came upon me. (Alvi 1988: 229, vv 52–55)

At first Maq̄sud's poem focuses on ritual events,⁴⁵ but in the second part his attention wanders away from the calendar to other mundane details: thus during Kartik 'people start making quilts and mattresses' (v 102), other girls poke fun at the *birahini* by calling her crazy and saying that she is under the influence of an evil spirit (*sāya*, vv 121–24), and she turns to various religious specialists promising generous rewards for their services once her husband comes back:

Shagun tū khol pothī dekh pānde. Piyā āvēge mukh se bol pānde.
 Piyā kā jis gharī darsan karūgī. Terā ghī-khānḍ se māī mukh bharūgī.

⁴⁵He mentions Gobardhan puja in Asarh, Saluno during Savan, Kanagat in Kvar, Divali and bathing in the Ganges in Kartik, and of course Holi during Phagun.

Pande, open the book and look at the signs, tell me my love will come.
The moment I see him come back, I'll fill your mouth with ghee, sweets
and sugar. (vv 89–90).

She calls him again a few months later to avert the evil astral influence that keeps her husband away, and gives him offerings (*dān-ṭikā*, 172), but she also goes to the dargah to pray on the Pir's tomb and promises to donate sweets and a cover if her husband comes back (vv 176–80, 203). In short, Maqṣud's barahmasa provides an example of a successful blend of a folk template, Khari Boli poetic diction and some Perso-Urdu imagery which we find replicated in the printed barahmasa songs and collections (see below). In fact, his poem must have achieved some popularity, since we find it printed in Devanagari in the 1870s, as well as copied down in Devanagari by individual readers.

That Maqṣud's peculiar stylistic blend was not unique is confirmed by a similar text that was also printed several times in Lucknow in the 1870s as a single poem (12 pp), i.e. the anonymous *Bārahmāsā Sundarkalī*. This is even more of a hybrid work, in that it brings in narrative elements (it is framed as the story of Prince Ratan Kunvar and Princess Sundarkali) and takes greater liberties with the description of the months. Thus, the poem begins in Asarh but with no mention of the rain (which only comes in Savan), and the cold nights fall not in Pus but in Magh. Other seasonal and ritual events are absent, apart from Holi, which takes up the whole of the month of Phagun. The 'fire of *biraha*' that consumes the heroine from the very beginning is here presented in decidedly physical terms. We are told that they were married as children and he immediately left 'for the East':

*Kite dīn sō mujhe huī javānī. Javānī ne kiyā mujhko divānī.
Javānī ne kiyā mere upar josh. Kaṭe bāl apne mē ab huā hosh.
Rangīle sej par ārām kīje. Khushī o rang-ras kā kām kīje.*

I reached youth a long time ago, my youth has made me wild.
Youth has made me burn I realise my childhood is over.
Do rest on this delightful bed, make merry and be happy.
(214, vv 12–14)

The cold season and warm clothing are described through significant objects, which signify the pleasures that warm beds offer to those who can purchase them.

*Mahīnā māgh kā partā hai pālā. Sakhī sab ghar-baghar oṛhe dushālā.
Bichaunā toshak aur oṛhē nihālī. Sabō ko ek taraf apnī taiyārī.
Kisī ko chīnt gujrātī o rūmī. Kisī ko bandarī patne kī mīnīnumī
Mujhe har vaqt ye jāṛā satāve. Nihālī aur razāī ko oṛhāve.
Bichaune ke upar phulō kī kaliyā. Piyāre pīu kahā vo rangreliyā.*

The month of Magh, frost has set in, all my friends are home wrapped
in their shawls.
Tucked into their quilts and covers, they are all well prepared.
One wears chintz from Gujarat, one from Rum, Portbandar or the waxed
one of Patna.
I am, instead, plagued by the cold, forced to burrow under mattress
and quilt.
These flower buds embroidered on the covers [remind me] of the merry
times with my love!

*Piyā kāran merī phartī hai ākhiyā. Jo āve pīu lagāū chātiyā.
Palang ūpar do tan liptāe rahte. Khushī ho rang-ras kā bhog karte.
Kī jāre mē mazā hotā annūthā. Jo gur-ghī se bhī lāge hai mīthā.
Agar ānā hai to jalā se āo. Mazā jāre kā hai ākar cakhāo.*

Because of him my eyelids flicker; if he comes I'll take him in my arms.
We'd lie together on our bed, and take our pleasure to the full.
Unique is the pleasure of the cold season, sweeter than *gur* and *ghī*.
If you are coming, come quickly; give me a taste of the pleasures of this
season. (Alvi 1988: 217–18, vv 85–90, and 219, vv 94–97)

Finally, for Chait the flowers in bloom and the gardener taking his pick in the garden offer the possibility of extending the metaphor to the heroine herself with further erotic double-meanings, in a language that recalls that of thumris and of contemporary theatre songs:

*Hamāre bāgh me phūle hai vo phūl. Vo kis ke bāgh me huā hai mashghūl.
Camelī sī dehī sakhī hamārī; rasīlī ākh yū nargis he pyārī.*

*Nayan ke pās campe kī kalī hai. Balak ye nāk campe se bhālī hai.
Merā mukh hai ki jyū gulāb kā phūl. Na jānū bāghbān kyā ho gayā bhūl.
Vo joban hai ki jyū anār kā phal; bhārī mithās se misrī kī jyū dal.
Bahār āyā, dukhanhār na āyā; anār āyā, cakhanhār na āyā.*

That flower has bloomed in my garden, but he has lost himself in another.

My body is like a jasmine, my friend, my eyes, liquid like narcissi.
Between the eyes is a *champa* bud. No, my nose is even prettier than that!

My mouth is like a rose bud; God knows what the gardener forgot!
My breasts, two pomegranates: full of sweetness like sugar.
Spring has come, my saviour has not; the pomegranate is ripe, but there's no one to taste it. (Alvi 1988: 221, vv 128–32, 136)

This overview of Urdu barahmasas complements the argument made by Imre Bangha and Christina Oesterheld in this collection, i.e. that parallel to the sophisticated Urdu literary culture centred on the ghazal and on Perso-Urdu models, another poetic culture existed that was not ignorant or oblivious of the former but drew upon Hindi poetic models and elements from folk culture and from contiguous modes like the pastoral-devotional and produced a range of poems which evoked a kind of alternative aesthetic to that of the ghazal.⁴⁶

By tracing the evolution of the genre we have been able to see the ways in which courtly, *qasbah* and bazaar poets variedly exploited the folk template to create quite different poetic compositions. Afzal's poem, for example, declined the figure of the suffering lover in the feminine gender, Keshavdas presented the ruler and his courtiers with ideal versions of their own, flattered selves, while Ilahi Bakhsh, Maqṣud and others played on the juxtaposition between the suffering heroine and the happy, sensuous *suhagins*. In a shift recurring in several Urdu poems, the twelve-month cycle remained but the *birahini* did not necessarily link her suffering to

⁴⁶Witness the informed opinion of Garcin De Tassy, who was aware of Afzal's poem and even translated Hazrat Jauhari's *Barahmasa kanval dāī* into French under the title of 'Un monologue dramatique', in *Journal Asiatique*, October 1850: 310–28.

the specific climatic, affective and ritual mood of each month. Also, while all the barahmasas used the *birahini*'s feminine voice, some poems worked the pathetic emotional register, others the flirtatious and argumentative, and yet others the sensuous image of 'wasted youth'—or a mixture of all these. In the end the barahmasa in Urdu became a narrative poem in 'woman's speech', whose attractiveness lay in the expressions used by the *birahini*, in her latent sexuality, but also in the quaint details about her eclectic religious practices.⁴⁷ This emphasis on worldly pleasures and on women's eclectic religious practices is to be found again in the barahmasas that flooded the print-market from the 1860s onwards. It is to these that we now turn.

BARAHMASAS IN PRINT

Barahmasas were perhaps the first substantial genre in the boom in commercial publishing in north India of the 1860s.⁴⁸ Unlike qissas, they first appeared in Devanagari and then gradually in Urdu as well. Crucially, the cheapness of lithography allowed the same printers to produce books in both scripts at low cost, without having to purchase a full set of type fonts: it was enough to *copy* a manuscript and print it. Lithography also allowed variants of writing and spelling and was therefore suitable for multilingual books and books in local dialects. Visually, lithographed books reproduced the experience of manuscripts, albeit with different formats and pagination. Barahmasas in Devanagari were printed in small, 16mo lithographed booklets of 8 or 16 pages, mostly and with a woodblock illustration on the cover, while in Urdu they were printed in the standard 12mo size of Urdu lithographed books, either singly or in collections of six or eight. The first edition I have found so far is a *Bārahmāsā*

⁴⁷Therefore elements other than the description of the season and the mood of the month could thus take centre-stage, as with the character of the parrot in *Barahmāsā Sundarkalī*, whose sub-plot takes up two whole months.

⁴⁸For a fuller account, see the chapter on barahmasas in my *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India*, forthcoming.

Khairāsāh printed in Agra by the Matba Ilahi in 1862.⁴⁹ The small format and the fact that it was brought out in Devanagari by a printer which otherwise mostly published Urdu books suggest to me that it was perhaps a sideline initially, aimed at the audience which might have bought books occasionally at fairs and read in Devanagari and not Urdu—i.e. women. After five further editions in Devanagari, the *Bārahmāsā Khairāsāh* was printed in Urdu, too, in Delhi in 1870; by 1876, it was a staple part of Urdu barahmasa collections.⁵⁰

Broadly speaking, two kinds of barahmasas dominated the market. First, short religious songs. Second, especially after 1870, longer songs like *Bārahmāsā Khairāsāh* which combined a folk-song template with popular Urdu verse in the manner of Maqṣud or the *Bārahmāsā Sundarkalī* also came into the market.

Devotional barahmasas were poems of only a few, rather elementary verses, often attributed to Surdas or Tulsidas, and appear to be of a kind with other compositions meant for group singing:... *Kṛṣṇa hī Kṛṣṇa raṭat narnārī* (men and women repeat the name of Krishna) is the refrain of one of them, while another has on the cover a woodblock image that depicts a Sant (Surdas) sitting in front of a group of women, all singing a bhajan, with a temple in the background.⁵¹ The template of twelve months was used to evoke in the two, short lines of each stanza incidents or *līlās* connected to the deity, while the refrain brought the mood back to devotional fervour or *viraha*. Thus in the barahmasa attributed to Surdas, also published as *Bārahmāsā Benīmādho*, each stanza contained one single detail from Krishna's exploits, while the name of the month at the

⁴⁹*Bārahmāsā Khairāsāh*, Agra 1862, IOL 14158.c.61(1). The same is true of the earliest editions of all the most popular titles, like the Barahmasas by Allah Bakhsh (Agra: Matba Ijad Kishan, 1867; IOL: 279.49.a.4) and Harnam Delhi Matba Ahmadi, 1869 IOL: VT1202.

⁵⁰E.g. *Majmu'a bārahmāsā* 1876 IOL: 14119.d.5; *Majmu'a dilpasand* 1876 IOL: 14119.d.6.

⁵¹The first is *Dropadījī kī bārahmāsī*, printed [in Delhi] at Matba Dilkusha, 16mo, 16pp. (IOL 14158.c.6); another edition was printed in Delhi at the Matba Jvalaprakash in the 1870s (14158.c.3); the second is *Bārahmāsā Sūrdās*, printed in Urdu characters in Agra by the Matba Rada (14109.a.10).

beginning sets the beat along the calendrical cycle; *Rāmcandra kā bārahmāsā* evokes moments of Ram's quest, and *Dropadījī* quickly retells the events related to the game of chess in the Mahabharata. George Grierson's 1880s collection of Bihari folk songs quotes a number of them which have the gopis and Udhav, Kaushalya and Lakshman as protagonists; some of these songs collected from 'ladies of Shahabad' were, he noticed, in 'nearly pure Bhojpuri', others had probably been originally in Braj Bhasha and were transmitted orally by the Bhojpuri-speaking women.⁵² The picture suggested is that of the reproduction and transmission through print of songs that were sung among groups of women. This is an example from the *Bārahmāsā Benīmādho* or *Sūrdās*; the language is clearly Braj Bhasha, perhaps slightly affected by the transition into Urdu script:

*Kātik kalol karē sab sakhiyā, Rādhā bicār kar man mē rī,
Mādho piyā ko ān milāo, nāhī prān bace chan mē rī.*

Refrain:

*Hamkau chār cale Benimādho, Rādhā sog kare man mē rī,
Agahan gend banāy sāvare, jāy khele taṭ Jamnā ke rī,
Khelat gend girī Jamnā mē, kālī nāg nāthū chān mē rī. (nd: 3)*

Katik, all girl friends make merry, but Radha is deep in thought:
Make me meet with Madho my love, or my life will leave me any
moment now.

Refrain:

Benimadho has left me and gone, Radha grieves in her heart.
Agahan, the Dark One has made a ball and plays on the banks of the
Jamuna.

As he plays, the ball falls into the river, where the black snake is.

By far the greatest circulation, though, was achieved by worldly barahmasas by poets like Khairashah, Harnam, Allah Bakhsh and Shambhuray. Khairashah's barahmasa was printed twenty times in Devanagari and Urdu in less than twenty years, Allah Bakhsh's at least fifteen times in a decade, and Harnam's at least six times

⁵²Grierson 1884: 204, 208.

between 1869 and 1878.⁵³ These poems elaborated on folk songs and roughly followed Indic metres with stanzas formed by a *doha* and usually eight verses, for a total of around a hundred verses. The numerous internal rhymes, the short and regular stanzas and the presence of a refrain all suggest that they were indeed meant for singing, while the presence of the intercalary month of *laund*, absent from more literary *barahmasas*, suggests that they were closer to folk songs.⁵⁴ Unlike folk songs, though, they were not in a local dialect but in a demotic language, a mixture of Braj Bhasha and Khari Boli; the vocabulary consisted almost exclusively of Hindi *tadbhava* words, mixed occasionally with simple Perso-Urdu vocabulary. In formal terms, therefore, they are to be distinguished from folk and devotional songs as well as from the poems in local Hindi dialects, from the courtly compositions in Braj Bhasha and from the Urdu tradition of Afzal's *Bikat Kahānī*. In terms of emphasis, they continue the shift away from the lyrical expression of the *birahini*'s suffering and towards a representation of a worldly aesthetic-ethic that harnessed the popular aesthetic and structure of feeling connected to the seasons and the calendrical cycle in order to produce a more diffuse aesthetic of worldly pleasure expressed through the trope of the woman.

The similarities between the poems—they vary mainly in the arrangement of tropes and expressions—suggests that the pleasure they offered was one based on seriality and recognition, and on the variation in the selective mention of ritual and other details.⁵⁵ After the initial focus on the *birahini* in the month of *Asarh*, with the customary parallel between the rain and her tears, the fear induced in her by lightning and her suffering enhanced by the birds' cries, these songs move to the festivals and pleasures of the ritual calendar that she is missing out on. The major festivals of *Dussehra* in *Kvar*

⁵³See Blumhardt 1900 and 1902.

⁵⁴See Wadley 1983.

⁵⁵If we compare the poems by Allah Bakhsh and Harnam we notice that for *Savan*, Harnam mentions celebrating *Saluno*, while Allah Bakhsh mentions *Tij* and the singing of *Malhar*. Both mention the joyous swinging on swings by the other, happy and bedecked women.

and *Divali* and *Naurata* in *Kartik* are mentioned, but the focus seems once more to be more on the worldly pleasures associated with the festivals, *melas* and clothes that the heroine is missing out on, than on ritual acts. This is Allah Bakhsh:

*Sakhī cauthā mahinā kvār, ā jā dildār, kahtī yū nār dvār par khariyā.
Ham kis par pahrē sakhī rī harī cūṛiyā.
Sab sakhī Nauratā khelatī, dekhtī mele piyā sang, leke gunṭhī chariyā.
Phūlō kī barkhā lagā rahī jhariyā.
Māī kis par dharū Dasahra, ghar nahī sājan merā: (vv 27–31)*

My friend, it's the fourth month of *Kvār*, come my beloved, say the
women standing at the door,
For whom should we wear our green *chunris*?
All our friends are 'playing' *Nauratas*, see the fair with their beloveds
and weave sticks.
Flowers are showering down,
Who should I deck *Dussehra* for, if my love is not at home?

Apart from the aesthetic effect created by the oil lamps, for *Divali* Harnam mentions the customary gambling playing:

*Ghar ghar divālī nauratē, sakhī pūjī khelē juā.
Lāl rang causar bichā hai, ek dāv mē badkar dharā.
Sakhiyō ko pau-bārah, mujhe shish-panj do pāsā parā.⁵⁶
Kar ās Gangā māī calī, raste kī sudh na bāt kī.
Pyāre piyā Harnām bin, ghar kī rahī na ghāṭ kī.*

In every house my friends worship *Divali* and *Naurata* and gamble.
A red *chausar* mat is spread out; we betted our throw of dice.
My friends got full score; I got only 'five and six'.
I went to bathe in the *Ganges*; lost to myself and lost the way.
Without my dear love, Harnam, I have nowhere to go.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Harnam here plays a pun on the heroine's state (*pau-bārah* = ace and 12 in dice; *śiś-panj* = lit. 'six and five', to be in a state of confusion or anxiety.

⁵⁷*Bāramāsa Harnām in Majmu'-e dilpasand*, Delhi 1876: 7

None of the barahmasas I have seen mentions Karva Chauth, Rakhi, Nag-panchami or Janmashtami or any of the other rituals deemed important for women. Instead, women's religion in the barahmasas consists of celebrating festivals and parading in nice clothes for and with their husbands/lovers. All without fail mention Holi, where the frolicking and flirting of the other women contrasts with the heroine's 'empty youth'.

The language of these barahmasas is significant for its hybridity. If the history of the nineteenth century is the history of the creation of modern standard forms and separate linguistic identities around Hindi and Urdu and of the reform of literary tastes, a process accelerating in second part of the century, then these texts point to the continued existence and currency of a highly mixed language and poetic idiom. The language is standard Khari Boli with some Braj Bhasha forms and occasional Perso-Urdu inflections, very far from that of the Urdu ghazal and of sophisticated Braj Bhasha poetry. *Tadbhava* forms abound, as they would have in the current speech of the time. This was a language that was clearly accessible to both Hindi and Urdu audiences, since the barahmasas were printed in both scripts with minimal variation. Print did tend to fix the language one way or another, mostly in line with existing written models: thus editions in Urdu script (which of course do not differentiate between the verb ending 'ai' 'y', 'e' and 'ī', e.g. karai, kare) tended to bring the language closer to Khari Boli by spelling Braj Bhasha verb forms as Khari boli ones ('*parē*' for '*parai*', '*chor*' for '*chār*') and occasionally using words more in line with Khari Boli Urdu ('*divānī*' for '*dukhārī*', '*thālī*' for '*thārī*', etc.).

The popularity in print of *this* kind of barahmasas shows that a genre which had known until then a multiple and layered history in women's songs, courtly poetic exercises, experiments by Perso-Urdu literati and urban popular poets, acquired a new function of entertainment for the Hindi-Urdu reading public, to which it offered an attractive image of a woman who was flatteringly dependant on men for her fulfillment, unlike the defiant beloved of the Perso-Urdu ghazal. Whether it was the *birahini* drawing attention to her wasted but youthful body or the beautiful *suhāgins* who enjoy sexual pleasures in harmony with the seasons, the message was a simple

one: a happy woman is not just a married woman (for the *birahini* is also married after all) but, as Hafizullah Qadiri's *Bārahmāsa neh* had already put it succinctly: 'A woman who is wanted by her husband is a *suhāgin*' ('*Jise cāhe sajan vo hai suhāgan*'. See 'Alvi 1998: 208). After months of complaints and lamentations addressed to the husband who deserted her and sent no news of himself nor asked any of her, the heroine is usually overjoyed to welcome him again at the end of the poem, her position as a *suhāgin* and her sensual appearance immediately reinstated—with no admonitory lesson for the male audience.

CONCLUSION

This essay has brought together different kinds of barahmasa poems in Hindi and Urdu on a common map, trying to figure the levels which they occupied in the multilingual, stratified and evolving literary system of north India between the fourteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The advantage of focusing on a 'minor' genre of folk origin lies in the evident ease with which poets from different cultural milieux manipulated it and refitted it according to their own intentions, without any worry about its pedigree. Barahmasas represent the kind of open, dialogic genre that Thomas de Bruijn (in this volume) considers characteristic of the pre-modern north Indian literary system.

Thus Sufis, from Mulla Daud to Jayasi, encapsulated barahmasas in their *premākhyāns*, the *birahini*'s suffering echoing a spiritual longing, but in pure Avadhi terms. At the turn of the seventeenth century, a Braj Bhasha riti poet like Keshavdas loaded the twelve-month template with poetic ornaments in a way that downplayed the *birahini*'s suffering and provided the perfect inspiration for palace paintings and miniatures. Only a few decades later, another poet, Afzal, this time coming from an Indo-Persian background, mixed the folk template with Persian phrases and expressions and produced a barahmasa that, together with its title *Bikaṭ Kahānī*, remained a blueprint for Indo-Persian poets for the next two centuries.

Imre Bangha (in this volume) has rightly called Afzal's *Bikat Kahāni* an example of 'Mughal macaronic poetry' and has argued that

The existence of this kind of poetry in north India before 1700 suggests that the fashion for Persianised Hindavi that Vali brought to Delhi did not 'create' Rekhta poetry in north India but rather displaced the pre-existing fashion for mixed language poetry. (87)

The eleven other Urdu barahmasas from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries collected by Tanvir Ahmad Alvi testify to the fact that poetry in Persianised Hindavi (the Rekhta that Mir preferred over all others), while hegemonic, did not completely displace the taste for this kind of poetry, whether in mixed language or in a colloquial idiom that combined a few, common Perso-Arabic words and tropes with *tadbhava* words and images.

The results were nonetheless formally varied. While poems like Maqṣud's or the *Bārahmāsā Sundarkālī* were clearly narrative poems formally modelled, like Afzal's, on the masnavi, the barahmasas that came into vogue in print in the 1860s and 70s were strophic song-poems. Linguistically and aesthetically, however, they point to a common fund of words, expressions and images which remained the same whether the template was pure Khari Boli or mixed Khari Boli-Braj Bhasha. Typically, the same song-poem would contain more Braj Bhasha verb forms and spellings when printed in Devanagari, and fewer when printed in Urdu. Rhyme would pair together words originally belonging from different poetic words (e.g. *dildār* and *nār* as in Allah Bakhsh above), creating a completely hybrid poetic idiom.

The fact that the barahmasa was in the feminine voice of a woman pining for her absent beloved was clearly an element of attraction for the poets and allowed them to experiment with what Bakhtin called 'speech genres', in most cases in the direction of a colloquial, idiomatic register rich in *tadbhava* words to signify mundane, seasonal activities and natural details. It is true to say, however, that the 'feminine voice' was not a stable signified. It could be a pathetic effect of great emotional intensity, when the voice returned relentlessly to the heroine's mental and bodily suffering. It could be sensuous,

when the lament drew attention to the woman's 'wasted youth' or when it became an excuse to evoke the pleasures that the seasonal festivals offered to the women whose husbands were not away. Finally, it could evoke a homely world of seasonal tasks, consultations about omens with religious specialists and the nice things to be had and enjoyed at different times of the year. Taken together with the feminine voice of Urdu marsiyas that Christina Oesterheld writes about in this collection, or the flirtatious voice of Sa'adat Yar Khan Rangin's (1756–1834/5) Rekhti and Mirza Nawab Shauq Lakhnavi's masnavis, we can see that there were several alternatives to the male voice of the ghazal.